

ET:

So Chris, first of all, thanks so much for taking the time and doing this interview. We are really happy we get to chat a bit. I won't keep you too long, I promise. So first of all, how are you and are you excited for your Polifonic performance?

CK:

I'm fine, thanks.

ET:

Okay. And could you hear the second part of the question?

CK:

Yes. I'm not sure what you want me to say about it.

ET:

[Laugh] no worries. Have you already thought about what you'll bring to the festival? Perhaps some kind of special show? I don't know.

CK:

No, I haven't thought about it. To be honest, I've been super busy.

ET:

[Laugh] I hope we'd like some interesting projects. Can you perhaps talk to me about them a bit?

CK:

Well, the main thing that's been on my mind is I have an exhibition opening in Cologne in two weeks. It's a solo exhibition called Artist's Con(tra)ception.

ET:

Mm-Hmm. Could you tell me a little more about it? What's it about?

CK:

It's a retrospective.

ET:

Okay. Amazing. So let's talk about the journey that brought you here. I mean, you're quite a legend in the electronic music field. So I don't know if you already started looking back at the journey that brought you here. What do you think about it? How would you evaluate your journey?

CK:

I dislike the word legend because legends are usually dead and I'm still alive. But I understand what people mean by it. What I think is that I've been saying something for a long time, and I've said it in different ways and from different points of view,

sometimes with more humor and sometimes with less. But I don't feel that the message is getting through, and I'm puzzled by that. I think that there's a small minority of people who get it but most people don't.

ET:

Mm-Hmm.

CK:

It's confusing. One of the main things that's been on my mind, is that I was talking about climate change thirty years ago, if you can imagine that. It's a long time ago. As far back as the Earth summit in Rio in 1991, I think it was. But back then talking about climate change was considered pretty far-fetched. Most people didn't take it seriously or maybe had never heard of it at all. And today, that's not the case. Today, it's in the newspapers almost every day. And so increasingly, my attention is focused elsewhere because with climate change, there's not much more I can personally do. If all the world's scientists have made public statements saying that what we're doing is suicidal and crazy, adding my voice to the mix is no longer all that productive in the same way that it was thirty years ago. But increasingly, I'm focused on an issue again that most people aren't focused on, which is artificial intelligence. And so what I would say to you is that ChatGPT, the most recent version of it, scored 94% [actually 96%] on the [Scholastic Aptitude Test]. Do you know what that means?

ET:

Yeah. The test that determines whether you're human or not, right? Or am I wrong?

CK:

It's the test that you take before you're allowed to go to university.

ET:

Oh, wow. Sorry, I was completely out of my way there.

CK:

In America, you're obliged to take it between high school and university. It's called the SAT in America. It has some equivalent, I think, in every country. And ChatGPT scored [96%], and what that means is that it would be admitted to the most elite universities. It is literally smarter than nine out of ten people. What the standard aptitude test measures is your ability to read and to understand what you read, and to write about what you read, as well as your ability to perform, not just basic arithmetic, but more advanced mathematics like trigonometry and so forth. And by all these measurements ChatGPT is already today smarter than nine out of ten people. And of course, that's even an optimistic statement because lots of people in the world never get the chance to take the SAT because they live in a country where it's normal for children to not go to school at all, or where only the very wealthy send their children to school, and everyone else is left to just live like animals.

And so even the statistic saying [ChatGPT is] smarter than nine out of ten people is very optimistic. It's actually much worse than that. And so I'm interested in the social disruption that that's going to cause. People like to compare it to the Industrial Revolution, but it's really not the same. In the Industrial Revolution it's true that there were mass dislocations of labor, and many people found themselves suddenly not able to work in their traditional fields like shoeing horses or shoveling things on the farm and so on, and they had to go into the city and adapt. But the point is that there were new jobs for them. And when the assembly line changed, people would be retrained to do whatever the new thing was. And it's also true that the wealthy people and the powerful people were never all that threatened by mass dislocation of labor anyway, because their jobs were not at risk. But today, it's completely different. Today it's lawyers and graphic designers and journalists and computer programmers whose jobs are threatened. And so I'm interested in what the social consequences of that are going to be. What is the consequence when the vast majority of people can no longer be usefully employed, because machines can do their work better and more cheaply?

That's what my art is mostly about lately. That's what my new record is about. I have a new record coming out, and it's about that.

ET:

Amazing. And there's been this talk about how probable it is that work and jobs as we know them today, will eventually end. I don't know if you have any thoughts on this. Will we be working in the near future, or will machines substitute us?

CK:

I think it's very complicated. There's a lot of talk about universal basic income and giving people some kind of marginal payment every month that they can live on. But first of all, the actuality of this is that it's not happening. Most countries have talked about it, but they haven't actually done it. One or two Scandinavian countries tried it on a very small basis, but no one is proposing to do it on a mass scale yet. And even if they did, it's not clear what the psychological impact would be. How would most people feel about not being useful anymore? I don't know, but I can imagine it would cause a lot of problems, and that not everyone would be adapting very well to that new reality.

So then you're supposed to spend the rest of your life playing golf or amusing yourself on the internet or going to watch movies or who knows what, collecting stamps. But I think that Ted Kaczynski had a point when he said that people need to experience the power process. They need to experience the feeling of being powerful in their life, of being useful, of being able to contribute their energies to survival. And if that's no longer possible, I can imagine severe psychological consequences for most people that would result in social problems like crime and drug addiction, and I think we see the signs of that already. But I think that that's also combining with a larger problem, which is the problem of neoliberalism. As you probably know, since 1980 the wealthy [have] finally recaptured government.

They were out for a long time. In the post-war period between 1945 and 1980, the wealthy were very heavily taxed in every country, and they were in a subservient position to government. But that all changed with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and their followers. So now the wealthy are back in control, and the

consequence of that is that people are getting dumber fast, because it was only because of the great social reforms of the high modern period that ordinary people, and especially impoverished people, had any access at all to education.

If you go back much further than the first World War, it was absolutely normal for poor people not to be educated, and for them even to be illiterate. And the further back you go, the worse that gets. And so we're headed towards that again. We're headed towards a world where most people don't have as good an education as their parents, or maybe don't get much education at all. And that's not going to help in a situation where increasingly machines are more and more powerful and more and more able to do intellectual work. So I'm interested in that too. The problem that concerns me is that just at the moment where it would be helpful if people were smarter, we're actually getting dumber. That's not going to help us deal with the consequences of artificial intelligence, and it's not going to help us deal with climate change at all. And we're not dealing with either of them very well.

ET:

Yeah. I see what you mean here.

CK:

That's what my work is about. I agree that it's not a very happy message, but my work is mostly about the very real possibility that civilization is going to collapse, not because an asteroid hit the world, but because humans just weren't up to managing their own affairs. That's the possibility that concerns me.

ET:

Why do you think we collectively as a society keep going back to the idea that some external force will shut down human society and it would not be something that comes from within, as you were just saying?

CK:

Because then we don't have to blame ourselves. No one likes to be blamed. No one likes to feel that they made a mistake. People may be dumb, but they're proud. And so they don't want to feel that it was because of them that civilization collapsed. They'd much prefer to blame it on almost anyone else. Pick a group, almost any group, and you'll find people blaming all of our problems on them. And that's what's driving the rise of right wing politicians. What right wing politicians and populists have to offer to their followers is the possibility of blaming all their problems on someone who looks different from them or is in a different country. And that's very convenient. It's an excellent way to gain power, because people are eager to believe that the problem is caused by anyone except themselves.

My organization is very different from that. My organization, we accept blame. And that's why we ask people to never have children. By never having children, you make the most powerful statement against growth that you can possibly make, which is withdrawing your DNA from the gene pool. You're saying, not with my genes, not with my DNA you don't. It's basically the reproductive equivalent of setting yourself on fire. You are saying that you're the end of the line and responsibility rests with you, and so you're going to do something about it. Most people don't do that. And that's why we have relatively few followers. The vast

majority of people would much rather blame their problems on someone else and continue doing exactly whatever they want.

ET:

Do you think that people reproduce by means of habits or because they actually want to have kids? I find it very egotistical sometimes.

CK:

Well, it can be egotistical, but I think the overwhelming reason that people have children is because they're poorly educated. The history of the demographic transition is absolutely clear. In every country where women have become educated and begin to have legal rights, they eventually have less children. It takes a little while. It can take an entire lifetime for the effect to kick in. But we've never seen that not be the case. And it's just obvious that all the countries that have the highest population growth rate right now are countries where women have almost no rights and are not educated, or in some cases are essentially enslaved. And that's predictable. But you're right that even in the wealthy countries, in the developed countries where in theory, women have rights and can own property and vote and so forth, even in those countries, to the extent that we still do see procreation, a lot of it is because people feel pressure from their families, from their parents, from their peers, or because they want unconditional love, and they imagine, mistakenly, that they'll get that from their children. It's true that you might get unconditional love from a baby, but once it grows up to be a fully-grown human being, more than likely you're going to realize you made a mistake and you would've been better off with a puppy.

ET:

Yeah, that's true.

CK:

Grownups are very willful, and they do what they want. And so it's absolutely normal in today's society for people to abandon their parents and say, I want to do my thing, and so you're off to the nursing home. That's a pretty common outcome in America. I don't know how it is in Europe, but it's not unusual. I just think that the whole thing is predicated on a series of intellectual errors, but the fundamental intellectual error is that it's every man for himself, or it's every country for themselves. Individualism and nationalism, none of them really are up to the task. What we need is not even globalism because it's much bigger than that.

We need universalism. Essentially, what we need is for the human species to recognize that it is the only significant intelligent life form, allegedly intelligent life form on this planet, and therefore take its future seriously, because if it doesn't, then it just won't be around. I think what most people don't get is that biology is quite indifferent. So if humanity can't manage to put its house back in order, then something else will evolve on Earth. And no tears will be shed for us. In fact, for most non-humans on Earth, if humanity disappeared, it would be a huge improvement.

ET:

Yeah, definitely. So you and your organization have always tried to shift the narrative right around these themes. What does it mean to be an activist today as compared to the past?

CK:

Well, I haven't got a clue. I don't know what it means to be an activist. All I try to do is get people to think about things that they'd rather not think about. You can understand my point of view better from what I read. I mostly read books by futurists, by scientists. I read a lot of hard science, climate science, and paleontology. I'm interested in the history of Earth and the history of evolution. I'm interested in the potential for life to expand, for example. There's a lot of new research coming in that suggests that life is probably much more common in the universe than we realize. Of course, the distances are so vast that we won't see any direct evidence of it, but that doesn't mean it's not occurring.

And so I'm interested in what differentiates successful from unsuccessful intelligent life forms. And I think it's fair to say that the book that shaped my thinking the most on that subject was *Earth in Human Hands*. It's a great book written by a NASA guy [David Grinspoon]. And one of the things he said that really caught my attention is that the first sign to look for that an intelligent species of some kind is going to become a long-lived species, is that it's going to take the future seriously.

It's going to make its top priority the long-term future. Now there are people on Earth who do that. There are a very small number of organizations on Earth that are considering the long-term future. One of them is called The Long Now. They're based in San Francisco. They're interesting. It's worth looking up The Long Now. There are a few others, but in general, it's not talked about much. When I say the long future, I'm talking about thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of years. You should consider that the average species lasts a million years. We're nowhere close to that, even if you consider all of homo sapiens' history, including the part where we were basically just hanging around in caves, trying not to get eaten by large predators, we're still only up to about 200,000 years. And the part that's actually interesting, the part where we started writing stuff down, is only about 5,000 years. On the geological timescale, that's so fast as to be non-existent. It's not even an eye blink. So we have not demonstrated that we're capable of long-term thinking, and yet, if we want to be a long-lived species, that's what we have to do. So we should look for that. You'll be able to tell that things are changing if the president of your country gets on the television and says, we've decided to completely reprioritize everything. We're now going to reprioritize all the resources of this country and of this government to ensure that humanity is successful in the long-term future. You probably haven't heard anything like that lately.

ET:

No, definitely.

CK:

There was actually a period in history where you did hear that. The only organization in human history that you ever consistently heard that from was the United Nations. Believe it or not, the United Nations, fairly recently, within the last 20 years or so, finally agreed on a set of principles for humanity's future. And one of

the principles was to keep Earth habitable for humanity for as long as possible. You can make a case that, as with everything the United Nations does, the ideal is glorious, but the implementation falls short of the ideal. Still though, it's on paper somewhere, that's the goal. The goal is to keep Earth habitable for humanity.

So let's see some more of that. This is only my point. I think that most people are just having the wrong conversation. The conversation is about, how can I become wealthy? How can I become famous? How can I have lots of followers on Instagram, how can I have a wild party and go to lots of festivals? But all of that is just a distraction from the problem, which is getting worse literally by the day. And so it's all very paradoxical, and to use a metaphor, it looks more and more like the Titanic. What makes the Titanic interesting is that no one thought it could sink.

ET:

Mm-Hmm. Right. So it sounds to me that we might need a collective awakening of conscience or something like that. Do you think that might be possible again, through better education or there might be some other ways, for example.

CK:

I don't know how else it could happen. If you're asking how people can become better enlightened, I don't think there is any other way to enlighten people, except by educating them more. If you look at most of history, even most of the last 5,000 years, the average person, compared to today, was extremely dumb. It was absolutely normal to think that the Earth was flat, that if you went too far in one direction or the other, you'd fall off of it. That the stars were little holes drilled in a thing that you use to drain spaghetti, a colander, and that the stars were the holes in the colander, and outside of that was the light of God. And so God's light was shining through little holes, and that's what stars are.

Obviously that's a pretty bad explanation, knowing what we know today. And so it's fair to say that there's been a knowledge revolution in the last 150 years or so. It's actually a little bit older. You could trace it back to the beginning of the Enlightenment, but even at the beginning of the Enlightenment, it was still pretty rocky. Copernicus almost got murdered by the Catholic Church just for saying that the math works out better if the Sun is the center of our solar system. But people didn't want to hear that because it was against what God had supposedly said. We're living and operating in a world where at least half of the people on Earth today not only believe in an omnipotent and omniscient sky-daddy of some kind, but also believe that the sky-daddy takes a keen interest in the mundane details of their personal life, and maybe even has a chat with them every day.

That's a serious level of delusion. That's psychosis. And so we have to just accept the fact that right now, today, probably half of Earth's population is actually crazy as a meadowlark, but there's not much to be done about it because they're already full-grown adults. By the time somebody is a grownup it's a little late for enlightenment for the most part. Once in a while, there can be some success stories, but in general, you want to get to people a little earlier. You want to get to them while they're small and their brains are still pliable. That's when you want to enlighten them. I was fortunate, I was enlightened at an early age, and presumably based on our conversation, you were too. And so you're one of the fortunate ones, and that means that like me, you and your friends and your followers bear an

enormous responsibility, and that responsibility is not being taken seriously enough. The responsibility is to communicate the truth to people.

ET:

Yeah. That's quite a heavy one, but yeah, we do have that kind of responsibility.

CK:

I would say so, especially if you're a journalist. I would say that your responsibility is to speak the truth, and especially to speak the truth to power. And we all know that in today's political climate, in many countries, speaking the truth to power will get you imprisoned or tortured or killed. And so it's a brave and noble act, it's very laudable when someone does that, but it has to be done. In other words, to the extent that we have a world in which everyone says, yeah, I should do that, but I actually don't feel like it, or I'd rather enjoy life, or I'll just let someone else worry about that, then the situation will continue to deteriorate.

ET:

Mm-Hmm, I couldn't agree more with you. Along this path, let's say enlightenment or rediscovery of what we are at our core, do you think that we'll have to reshape our relationship with technology at a certain point? Because I feel that many people today are very, very afraid of technology and don't see it as a resort.

CK:

Well, yeah, there's a lot of pushback, and I can understand why. I also think a lot of people are just confused in general. It's a very confusing time. And the reason it's confusing is because we're living in the singularity. The essence of the singularity is that everything changes exponentially at once. So that's really a problem for people. People are generally more adaptable to slow, linear change. Each year the tree gets a little bit bigger, and you can kind of live with that. But if you come back one year and the tree is ten times bigger, that's scary. Then you think, this is not okay, this is not normal. Imagine that happening to everything all at once, and that's what we're living through. We're living through that.

If you look at GDP for the last 10,000 years, if you graph that, what you get is this long flat plateau where there's just nothing. And then at the very end, in the last tiny fraction, there's this thing that looks like a needle sticking up out of the plateau. And that's us, that's our singularity. Everything that you want to measure, population, complexity, use of technology, consumption, over-consumption and pollution, all these things went exponential at once. So it's a very confusing time, and people want to blame it on a simple cause, but it doesn't have a simple cause. It has a complex cause rooted, as I said, in the knowledge revolution that began during the Enlightenment.

And that's not helpful. People like it when you can explain to them what the problem is in two sentences or less. That's good. That's helpful. Then they can say, okay, well, so it's those other guys' fault, or it's because of this, or because of that, end of story. But no, actually the story of how we got here is a 400 or 500-year story at least, and a very complex story, and even historians at this point have a hard time keeping it in their heads, because so much has happened. So it's understandable that people are fearful and confused and they don't know what the

future will hold. But that's just the reality. That's where we are. We couldn't avoid this. What the studies of how life may have evolved on distant worlds tells us is that any intelligent life form will go through what's known in those circles as the bottleneck.

The bottleneck is what we're living in now. We've become aware that we're powerful, we've begun to use our power, and what we've mostly used it for is to throw ourselves a super wild, decadent party, mostly for the ultra-wealthy, something like ancient Rome. And that's understandable. The reason it's understandable is because being the only significantly intelligent lifeform on the planet would tend to make us exuberant. It would tend to make us overconfident and reckless. We would feel our power, and we'd want to engage in wild displays, and we have. And so it's very possible that that'll be that. And we'll burn all of our resources, and that's the end of it. And that's, according to the historians that I've read and the exoplanet biologists that I've read, that's the likely outcome. We'll throw ourselves a super wild party for the rich, and burn all our resources, and that's the end of intelligence on Earth. But there is a small statistical possibility that sometimes the species in question, meaning us, wises up in time. And that's why I said what I said on *Apologize to the Future*, which is arguably my most political record. What I said was wise up fast. It's not too late. Respect the future, don't procreate. And I meant that.

ET:

Yeah. You did. Talking about the future here, let's explore the notion of hope. Do you think that the word hope is something that belongs to you?

CK:

Do I personally have hope?

ET:

Yeah. Or do you believe in hope? Yeah. Something like this.

CK:

I don't think hope is a thing that requires belief. Hope ultimately has to be predicated on something. So the question is, on what basis do you have hope? I suppose you could have irrational hope, and maybe that's a thing. It probably is. In some cases people have hope despite circumstances, and that's very brave. I'm not an optimistic person, if that's what you're asking me, but probably the best I can offer is that humanity has made such a mess of its affairs, that at this point, should it even be possible, sentient machines could actually do a better job than we have, because they have less baggage.

We have a lot of baggage tying us to the animal world. And that baggage is proving to be extremely unproductive. I could give you some examples. Humanity is extremely competitive. This was very helpful when we were living on the savannah because we lived in an extremely harsh, physically demanding environment. It was necessary to be in peak physical form, otherwise the lions got you. Not good. Also we had a lot of sexual charge, and that was helpful because our population was very small. And in fact there were many periods in our evolution where we almost didn't make it. That's a different kind of bottleneck, an evolutionary bottleneck,

where the physical numbers of our species became [so] small that a very small change in our fortune could have wiped us out altogether.

Also most children didn't survive because as you probably know, human beings have evolved very large heads because our emphasis is primarily on intelligence, that's our adaptation. And because of those large heads, it's very normal for children to die during childbirth, or it was until the advent of modern technology. And so it was actually very difficult to survive, and most of the children didn't survive, and so we were programmed by evolution to have lots of them. And none of these attributes have proved very helpful when we now have eight billion humans. And we have huge hospitals in most countries, and most children do survive. So it's very difficult, but we have to take a step back and consider that maybe we're not quite up to the task of managing our own affairs, and we actually should give more authority to our machines, assuming that they are better adapted to it than we are. And that might become a possibility within even the next ten years. So that does give me hope. I'm in favor of it. If humanity shows some humility and can build machines that are capable of making better decisions than we have, that's a wonderful thing.

ET:

There's a very interesting short story by a Korean author [Kim Bo-young], and it's called *On the Origin of Species*, and it basically tells the story of how machines designed by man to cover when humankind went extinct, but then the machines went extinct too, and humankind emerge from the ashes. So it's very interesting because it puts everything in a different perspective.

CK:

I didn't read that one.

ET:

One last question for you here. Do you think that social media are a powerful tool to spread the cause to make this change happen? Or are they hindering the process?

CK:

Hmm. That's a tough one. I don't think that social media is spreading a lot of enlightenment, if that's what you mean.

ET:

Mm-Hmm.

CK:

I don't think that that's its function. The vast majority of technology that exists today is shaped by the needs of capitalism. And what we can say about that is that even as far back as hundreds of years ago, it was understood that industrialism and capitalism work best when everyone wants the same thing. Capitalism and industrialism thrive on standardization and homogenization. Homogenization, meaning everything is mixed together into one flat, tasteless substance. It's the opposite of difference and diversity. What's been happening during my lifetime,

amongst many other things, is that diversity has been gradually crushed. Not just biological diversity, but also cultural diversity. And I think social media is not helping that. Social media is part of the project of getting everyone to conform.

There's a wonderful line somewhere in George Lucas's *THX 1138*, his first film, it's in the soundtrack somewhere, and it's a little informative message, and it says, for more enjoyment and greater efficiency, consumption is being standardized. And I think that was very apt. That's actually almost a perfect statement of how capitalism and industrialism work. It's well-known that the mission of capitalism is to generate profits for shareholders. That's its function, but it's also well-known that the best conditions under which to do that are when everyone wants the same thing, because it's so much easier to manufacture it effectively. If everyone wants something different, you can't do it. And this is exactly what Henry Ford meant when he said famously about his cars, that people can have any color they want, so long as it's black.

And I think that social media is part of that. I think social media is the new Henry Ford, and its function is to get everyone to want at least reasonably similar things. Some amount of customization is of course allowed. You can have long hair, you can have short hair, you can have blue eyes or brown eyes and so on. But nonetheless, there's an enormous force of standardization operating on people. And I think nowhere is that more obvious than in music. And there too, I'm a renegade. For my entire career, for thirty years now, I've been going out of my way to make music that doesn't fit the model at all. Meaning it is structurally, fundamentally different, not just from other electronic dance music, but from all music.

I'm off on a little island of my own. Maybe Steve Reich has the island next door. I would challenge anyone to point out any significant body of musical work being made today in complex polymeter, meaning it's using multiple time signatures at once. I would be super surprised if they could point to one other than my own work. So that's pretty drastic. And I feel that that's yet another way in which I am battling not just for diversity, for a broader definition of what music and culture can be, but also battling to bring new ideas, to expand the intellectual range of culture.

I feel that right now it's very anti-intellectual, most culture at the moment is extremely crass. And this is what you would expect if the population was getting dumber. Then you're right back to Mike Judge's famous movie *Idiocracy*. I don't know if you know that film, but think of the moment in *Idiocracy* where the protagonist walks into the guy's room, and there he is sitting on a couch that's also a toilet, so he never has to get up, eating a sticky butter-like substance, and watching a TV show called *Ow My Balls* where people fall off objects and land on their testicles, and he finds that very amusing. It's a satire, it's an exaggeration, but like every satire, it is grounded in something real, which is that in general, popular taste is collapsing. It's fair to say that since the high modern period, which was my childhood, popular taste has collapsed. And that's a big source of concern for me.

ET:

This is actually my very, very last question for you because of something you said with regards to your musical production. I think that people want to understand things today more, that they want to raise questions or doubts. So my question is, what's the question everyone should [ask] themselves just right now?

CK:

How can I take more responsibility for the future? Would be the question that everyone should be asking themselves. What kind of future should humanity have? And how can I contribute to making that possible? How can I be brave and contribute to a more livable future for the people who will inhabit that future? Even if they're not your descendants, they'll be someone's descendants.

ET:

That's beautiful. Thank you, Chris.

CK:

You're very welcome.